Niveau(x) d'enseignement: 3 Numéro EDUQ : 9370979
Centre d'intérêt: 752

Fraser, Janet.

Among teachers : whole language in the classroom / by Janet Fraser. -- [Québec] : Direction des services éducatifs aux anglophones, 1993.
53 p. ; 22 cm.

Code: 9293-3205; 72-0053A.

ISBN 2-2550-23657-

Vedette(s)-secondaire(s): Québec (Province). Direction des services éducatifs aux anglophones

Descripteur(s): Anglais (Langue) * Langue maternelle * Aide pédagogique aux enseignants * Primaire (Ordre d'enseignement)

Identificateur(s) de sujet: English language arts

Une enseignante de 23 années d'expérience rend compte de ses deux années d'aide pédagogique auprès d'enseignants du primaire pour l'implantation d'une théorie appelée "whole language" dans les programmes d'English language arts.

Type de document:

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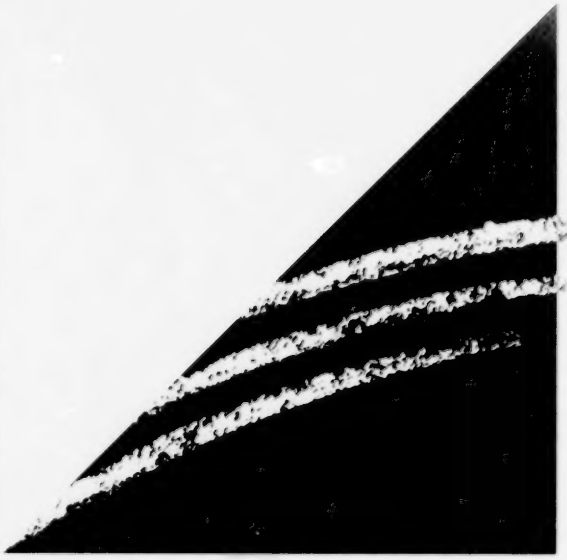

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Among Teachers : Whole Language in the Classroom

by Janet Fraser

Direction des services éducatifs aux anglophones

FOREWORD

For two years, Janet Fraser, an elementary teacher at the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal, travelled throughout the province of Québec as a resource person to other teachers who needed professional support in developing a pedagogy of whole language. Her expertise in the use of the whole language approach was made available to teachers through a project that was developed by the Direction des services éducatifs aux anglophones (DSEA) in collaboration with the Direction de la formation générale des jeunes (DFGJ), both of the ministère de l'Éducation.

Janet Fraser's account of her work with English language arts teachers in the province of Québec, written in the genre of a personal narrative, is an eloquent expression of the richness of the implicit knowledge of teachers and of children. In writing her story, Janet helps us to understand both how implicit knowledge can be shaped into explicit knowledge, and how important it is for practising teachers to come together in order to share their questions, reflections and pedagogical expertise.

As important as it is for teachers to have frequent and continuous opportunities to share, it is even more important that they be supported in writing what they know about pedagogy, and how they came to know it. The value of this kind of teacher-knowledge affirms the active role of teachers in creating pedagogy and in enhancing their profession.

Janet Fraser brings her own understanding to the practice of whole language pedagogy, an understanding based on dialogue with colleagues and on years of experiences among elementary school children. The journey she describes is one of, in her own words, "...talking myself into sense" in the company of other teachers, who valued her ability and supported her professional growth. As you will see, it is what teachers taught Janet when she first explored the potential of whole language in her own classroom that inspired Janet's relationships with so many of the teachers she worked with in her travels around the province.

I believe in teachers. I've spent 23 years being one and I've never been bored, not once. There was always room for one more creation. Education has been a source of delight and much learning, whether the impact was felt in a formal institution or my own backyard. Education is one giant quest toward knowing. Consequently it changes. It should, because it's a composite of our minds and bodies, of the ideas, research and experimentation that come from both. Education is a multidimensional expressway of human emotions, all of which contribute to our learning. Education both receives and gives, and the movement of its content and methodology can be as rhythmic, constant, innovative and creative as modern jazz or a complex fugue by Bach. And there is magic indeed when methodology and content are in perfect harmony and enlightenment is felt.

I believe in education as a whole, and education in its parts. Since the whole is the sum of its parts, I must conclude that each part is important. Go back to my very first sentence: **I believe in teachers**. From 1988 to 1990, I worked for the ministère de l'Éducation. My job was to help Grade 1 teachers in the province of Québec implement the theory of whole language into their classrooms. Keep in mind, as you read on, that although it is I putting pen to paper today, many of the thoughts in this account are those that were expressed by colleagues

throughout the province over the last two years and back down over the 23 years of my teaching career. Keep in mind too, that though my dossier stated "Grade 1", I was actively involved with consultants, principals, parents and teachers in all of the first cycle. I also spent time in special education, kindergarten, French as a second language and second cycle classrooms. The project involved helping teachers across the province apply the whole language theory in their classrooms and it fascinated me. Apart from becoming well acquainted with my province, I welcomed the opportunity to share with, and learn from, my colleagues. I was given leeway to organize my work as I wished. This freedom to explore my philosophies, to risk, and to dare is what made the project an honest success. Words such as "enthusiastic," "welcome," "successful," "priority," "supportive" and "necessary" described how teachers and administrators alike felt about the project.

Two people at the Ministry of Education, James Sullivan (DSEA) and Gayle Goodman (DFGJ), asked me to share what occurred during the two years I was affiliated with the project. I agreed. The reason I did goes straight back to my first statement: **I believe in teachers**. While touring this province, from the shores of the Gaspé and up to the Îles-de-la-Madeleine, from Val d'Or to Chibougamou, and way up to the tip of Québec in La Tabatière, I saw, felt and heard teachers' needs.

Our world of methodology and content has been changing rapidly. As teachers, we need more attention, and by attention I don't just mean making sure we're keeping up with change in a realistic and comfortable way. From new theories of learning, to new programs, to new classroom management strategies, to integration of special needs children, to dealing with students and parents whose expectations have changed, we have one very full plate in front of us. Some teachers are out of breath from trying to "do it all." I want to stress here that these teachers are the high-energy, eager-to-learn members of the profession. They are numerous and they span all ages. I don't want to see this dedication die down or burn out. This enthusiasm needs constant and careful nurturing because these teachers are the ones who will rekindle the fire of dedication in others. Then there are the other teachers, those who feel bewildered, those who are simply retreating into their classrooms and closing their ears at workshops. Here are some things teachers had to say:

- "I'm tired of the public's view of us."
- "I'm tired of being asked to implement something without proper guidance."
- "I'm tired of the scraps of encouragement I get from my principal."

– "I'm tired of being asked to do more as if it's nothing."

– "I'm tired of workshops that can be redundant and boring."

– "I'm tired of having my job labelled as an easy job."

– "I'm tired of an ever-expanding curriculum that threatens to drown me."

– "I'm tired of workshops where we share our ideas only to see them end up in someone else's publication."

– "I'm tired of getting no support."

– "I'm tired of higher-ups receiving all the accolades from what we teachers work so hard on."

– "I'm tired of constantly encouraging myself by myself."

– "I'm tired of having to beg for supplies."

– "I'm tired of poor teachers being kept in the system."

– "I'm tired of *not* being recognized for the hard working, responsible professional that I am."

Education creates teachers. What kind of teachers are being sought in institutions of learning today? Teachers who will risk and dare as never before. Teachers who believe that their students own the experience of learning. Teachers who are not "recipe-fed!"

But that's not all the education system and society expect from teachers now. Far from it. Teachers today have to be directors, producers, social workers, nurses, psychologists, diplomats, secretaries and parents *besides* being educators faced with the challenge of teaching an ever-expanding curriculum. Teachers feel a far greater number of social demands within the school environment. They must be prepared to interact with students of many levels, parents, social workers, consultants, aides, shadow teachers, psychologists, principals and student teachers as never before and *all of them want the optimum effort the teacher can give*. Over the years, parents wanted and were given more opportunity to "input." School committees were set up. Parents in many schools were invited into classrooms to watch the teacher "in action." Parent-teacher interviews were reviewed and expanded. School commissioners were elected by the public and have gradually assumed their role in educational development. Over the years the word "accountability" became - and still is - the buzz word when referring to the teacher.

Along with changes in the school environment came changes within the family structure throughout the seventies and eighties. The population now included heterosexual parents and gay parents, as well as divorced and single parents, and much of this population was working. Up went the rate of employment for daycare centres, baby-sitters and nannies. Down went the amount of time that parents could spend daily with their children. Children were not only being looked after by other care-givers far earlier than ever before, but they were also receiving instruction at a much younger age. From daycare to pre-kindergarten to kindergarten, children were developing specific skills as well as skills in social interaction and independent behaviour. These skills were also being learned in the home environment as the child connected and interacted with the nanny or baby-sitter. And something else was happening because of the change in family structure. Communication between parent and child was developing. Young people were being taught to love and care for themselves, to dare, to risk, *and* to question. For the most part, today's child is allowed a far larger forum in which to speak. Young children and teenagers alike feel that they *quite rightly can and will express their points of view*. They are, in fact, quite at ease with self-expression.

Along with social changes came the computer. It entered homes with a vengeance, and young people were receiving one-to-one instruction from modern technology. Apart from glassy-eyed syndrome, the computer brought further development in specific skills and independent behaviour. It gave the child a sense of confidence and accomplishment.

All these developments within the home environment have spilled over into the school environment. As students, young people want the best of *anything and everything*. They are restless with recipe lessons from recipe-fed teachers. They want to be as actively involved with their quest for knowledge as possible. And they want a learning environment that reaches beyond school doors. It's what they came to expect at home, so why not at school? All this, of course, is part of that very full plate that is set before teachers today.

I and a lot of teachers like me were brought up with manuals. I remember feeling a rather giddy excitement when I finally held that manual under my arm. That to me was the one big "**signal**" that you were a teacher. *We* were recipe-fed. We were told "**how to do it**" by professors and manuals. There was guided reading, phonics exercises, spelling programmes, math programmes, sample literature units - all with step-by-step procedures. You

studied the manual, then did the lessons and followed up either with lots of stencils or a project. We were even given all the *right* questions to ask. A large number of us became *Cling-Ons* to that manual. How there still managed to be creativity among teachers gives credence to the saying "you can keep some of the people down some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time." We went through rods in math and programmes like Ginn 360 and Sullivan in reading. We taught a new spelling program for 30 minutes a day in first cycle, which was torture for both student and teacher. We taught 2/3 of 9 in Grade 1 and wondered why it wasn't retained. We didn't have time to read lots of books to students - there were too many manual lessons we had to cover. And although one might stray into experimenting in science, which caused real questioning, or drift into an art or writing lesson that *just happened*, much of the time most of us stayed where it was safe and secure - with the manual.

Since teachers are that very important "part" of education - the people who work closely with the student - we need more assistance. Not that we don't have videos, workshops and books now. We do. I'm talking about another, perhaps more valid, kind of assistance. I feel there is a link missing in the chain of regional directors, principals, vice-principals and consultants. This link, which I will call the "teacher link" would provide more *consistent* sharing and helping. It would provide that

reinforcement and encouragement I talked about earlier which is so necessary for *belief in one's ability to do the job*.

This is not to say that consultants, principals and vice-principals have not tried to be sturdy links. My impression is that principals and vice-principals have bussing, paperwork, regional meetings, board meetings and the whole "environment" within their school or schools to deal with. Too, consultants are often bogged down in meetings and paperwork. In many cases, they have large geographical regions to cover. Add to this the fact that, according to union regulations, consultants must be "invited" into a classroom in order to work directly with teachers. I believe a survey would reveal that the number of invitations issued are not directly proportional to the need. Finally, all of this is compounded by the fact that schools in general must cope with low budgets, and schools in the English sector, with lower budgets than most. Principals, vice-principals and consultants - those of the administration who are, to date, the teachers' closest link, cannot give teachers everything they need. Teachers' needs are simply too great with too small a professional force to tend to them.

Teachers must be a priority in the nineties. There is no question of criticizing what has been or is being done in education. Each step, each turn, each path is important in

the journey towards the final connection. The truth is simple: our goal as educators is to give young people the most up-to-date learning experiences we can. Therefore *we ourselves must receive the same quality of pedagogy as we are expected to deliver to our students.*

Between 1988 and 1990, I believe I helped give this quality of pedagogy to my colleagues. No matter where in the province, I linked up with teachers by phone and then walked into their classrooms. Thus emerged the "teacher link." I simply stepped right up and said: "Hi, I'm Jan. Where are you at? How can I help?"

I linked by teaching or team-teaching their children. I further shared by:

- Helping with classroom management
- Making materials
- Giving workshops
- Dialoguing openly with teachers, administration and parents

I believe this kind of interaction created trust and respect among us. The growth of trust and respect definitely leads to the opening of a person's mind.

Listen to the voices of my colleagues:

> "The teachers worked as a team, as active participants in their learning. This approach is preferable."
>
> "It was the best learning experience I've had in a long time."
>
> "I felt I'd known Jan forever."
>
> "I've always wanted help right in my school. It should be practical, which is exactly what the project was."
>
> "Having a teacher in the classroom with your students makes it real and concrete."
>
> "This was the best in-class support that I've ever had."
>
> "No matter how many in-service workshops or conferences a school board organizes, the comprehension and implementation of a new theory cannot be as precisely portrayed as it was in this project."

I've stated a few of the many reasons why today's teachers need attention. From 1988 to the present time, there is no greater need than in the area of English language arts. The elementary English Language Arts I-VI program provides us with an excellent theory of how

students can better learn to read, write, listen and speak. The sign on the door says: No recipe-fed teachers here. Further, this theory of learning and its subsequent implementation is doubly important because it can and should be transferred to all other subject areas. Has whole language really been that challenging and difficult a change? Believe it - yes!

Our heads had to change philosophically and our bodies had to implement these changes practically, within the classroom. We weren't just changing reading programs. We were ending one relationship of long standing and beginning another. We *NEEDED* time, but in many cases, were being asked to implement and learn whole language pedagogy simultaneously in one year. This was quite a demand, considering we also had to cope with explaining to parents something we were just beginning to grasp ourselves. Today, teachers in both cycles of elementary school still feel they need help with the whole language approach. This news isn't surprising to me. It wasn't as I listened to my colleagues in the two years I travelled the province. You see, I had had to take time, and plenty of it, to look, to experiment, to question ... and I was lucky. I felt the impact of teacher links right at the start. It was because of my two links, the Colley sisters, that I was able to develop my pedagogy of whole language, and this experience, in turn, helped me to see how I might best support other teachers.

"My links would be behind me, guiding me"

One evening, many years ago, K. Colley talked of something new in teaching. It was about students' writing. Not the usual composition, but real, live, everyday writing of their own. I was told I wasn't to worry at the start if students didn't put all the correct letters in their words. In fact, for any student who was learning to write, highest on the list of priorities was encouraging and motivating them to try. I heard the words "whole language" and "approximated spelling" for the first time. My reaction was an immediate list of questions:

"Where in my day will I fit this in?"

"You say they're going to learn to read because they write? How? Why?"

"What about my readers?"

"What if it doesn't work?"

"What will parents say?"

"Why haven't I heard about this?"

I also made a couple of statements:

"You watch, it'll be around for a while, then gone."

"You go ahead..... I won't be."

So adventurous was I!

"It is I who am in there doing the teaching.
I have to believe in what I am preaching.
I have to trust the product I sell,
to my students and yes, to their parents as well."

But, and these are qualifications that need to be made about teacher links: I had tremendous respect for K. and J. Colley as educators and they didn't give up, because *they* believed in whole language pedagogy. And they believed in *me*. My tirade of questions was answered patiently, and sister J. went further, by handing me something to read. It was a short, explicit explanation of the "how to" and "why" of writing in the classroom. It wasn't a recipe, it was more like a framework within which I could actively participate and discover who I was as a teacher in relation to these ideas. My teacher links would be behind me,

guiding me. All was kept simple. I was made to feel that yes, I *could* negotiate this one! Neither of the Colleys threatened my entrenched habits. It was more a feeling of: "Here, try this, and then we'll talk." All communication among us was respectful and gave me a sense of space. I was satisfied that I was attempting "something," but secure with moving forward at my own pace. I wanted ownership. I felt that as a capable teacher of 16 years, I had an intrinsic right to create the conditions for my own learning, and the goals that I wanted to achieve.

My teacher links proved to be a wonderful support! They encouraged me and sensed when I was ready to try a little more. When I had more questions, and I did, they were there. They kept giving me short but meaningful articles to read, and when they knew I was hooked, they encouraged me in a different way. I was to attend conferences and visit other teachers to see whole language in action! Instead of short articles, I was given my first professional book to peruse. And all the while, I kept making meaning of all that I was learning in my classroom. It was a most delicious learning experience for me, especially as I knew that I owned more of it than I ever had before.

"...better understanding and more open dialogue"

It is no surprise, therefore, that I transferred some of my own positive learning experiences into the DSEA project. My desire was simple: that each teacher and I share as much as possible within the three days allotted and that those days be looked upon as meaningful and worthwhile when they were over. My first job was scheduling - a definite challenge. Faraway places such as the Îles-de-la-Madeleine and La Tabatière were given three consecutive days each. I also made these trips in the fall, so that teachers could start living what we had learned together right away. The teachers in the project were told they could phone at any time with questions, which they indeed did. This scheduling differed for the Gaspé. In Gaspé, I had to visit five different schools all the way down the coast. Accordingly, I spent a week there on three separate occasions throughout the year, i.e., November, March and May. I tried not to go too far afield in the dead of winter, as storms could cause cancellations. Despite this, however, my schedule was tight. During the winter months, I worked with teachers in schools within the city limits. I varied the allocation of the maximum

of three days in urban or suburban areas. As I had to work my way around different boards and schools, different holidays and professional development days, I stopped asking which days were preferred and started saying - in advance - when I was available. It was all part of my learning. It would have been wonderful to see all of the teachers in the project once in the fall, but, alas, for this to be possible, a longer autumn would have been necessary!

As teachers were accepted into the project by application, telephone interviews were required in order to screen prospective participants. The first year of the project, all screening was done for me, but in 1989-1990, I decided to interview teachers myself. That way I would be interacting with the teachers immediately. Besides, teachers were supposed to have "chosen" to be part of the project. In 1988-1989, I discovered that for a few, the project had been *chosen for them*. I had to deal with attitude problems that year, and although these were cleared up, they only brought negatives to a project that was focussing on positives. I'd like to point out here (with a smile) that the enthusiasm and desire to be part of the project was greatly augmented in its second year (1989-1990). My experiences interviewing teachers were indicative of this change in attitude.

Once the teacher interviews were finished, I phoned the principals. We discussed the following:

- Dates for visits
- Release of teachers
- Workshops
- Materials
- The involvement of the principal in the project

Principals freed up teachers from other grades, other schools, even other boards, especially in the more remote areas. At times, there were up to eight teachers in a single classroom, intermingling with the students, and interchanging thoughts and ideas with each other. This was meaningful because I was in their school, in their region, daring to present answers to their questions in an active way, through the children. This approach worked so well, that, although I had 50 teachers *officially* on paper, the *sharing* spread to some *150 teachers* in 1989-1990.

I also informed principals that I would be pleased to give workshops to teachers of the first cycle and second cycle together. My belief is that we need to know what each other is doing and that teachers across the two cycles tend to stay isolated from one another. Since whole language pedagogy includes the view that learning is developmental, I wanted to pull teachers in from their

separate corners to examine the implications of this development from pre-kindergarten to Grade 6. I hoped this strategy would result in better understanding and more open dialogue among all teachers.

I knew, too, that for principals *and* teachers alike, English language arts was still only one area of the entire curriculum. Therefore, the variety of materials offered was kept to a minimum. I thought that too much choice of materials might result in confusion, dollar signs flashing, and a tendency to buy nothing, in the end. I explained that most of the material I had needed in my own classroom could be made. Principals, I feel, are quite willing to give as long as their teachers are prepared to be *creators*, as well as buyers. On the other hand, I feel that teachers *are* prepared to be *creators*, if given the *time*. One general need for teachers, I told the principals, would be to have easy access to markers, writing paper, bristol board, construction paper and file folders. The most important need of all, though, would be a commitment to buying new reading material, and lots of it, as the basal reader left centre stage. Despite the cost, I asked school principals how new reading resources in English language arts or any subject area could be seen as a waste? They agreed.

During the time I spent in different schools around the province, I encouraged principals and vice-principals to come into the classroom at any time. Many did. I respected those who did. You see, as a teacher I feel that my principal should be aware of new theories of learning, and of the impact of such theories on classroom practice. A principal doesn't have to have a M.A. on the subject of learning theory, but must have enough practical knowledge, so that he or she can communicate with both teachers and parents. Teachers need to receive encouragement, and a ready nod to their requests to purchase new teaching materials. No matter what, a principal who is just *administering* is *not* capable of supporting the teacher-as-learner.

I must state here that I was delighted with the interest shown by the majority of principals. Listen to their voices in answer to the question "How do you feel about projects of this kind?"

> "When instituting new programs and philosophies, this hands-on, practical and friendly one-to-one relationship accomplishes more, faster, than in-service workshops and seminars. To have a kind of *mentor* ensures successful implementation."

> "Teachers need support and this project can provide that. Many teachers are experimenting in schools where nobody else is. They need support."

"It is often difficult for small schools in the outlying regions to send teachers to workshops in Quebec or Montreal (costs... time)."

"This in-service experience was probably one of the most beneficial that teachers in schools could be a part of. Please do everything you can to keep it going."

"By observing another teacher in action, the classroom teacher is able to model her. Dozens of workshops do not have the same effect."

"We need more. Using a teacher to help in Grade 1 is only a beginning. There should be more teachers available to work in schools with other teachers, to promote whole language and the many aspects involved with this approach. I would like to see this project continue each year, with several days available to help all staff members."

"I think that because Jan is a teacher herself, other teachers do not feel threatened by her, as she is not there to evaluate, but rather to share some very practical ideas with them."

"It is an excellent way to in-service. We would love to have Jan meet the *expressed* language arts needs of other teachers."

"This is an excellent project and should be expanded into others areas of the curriculum."

Now to my colleagues, the teachers. Once a teacher had been accepted into the project, phoning him or her to provide support was an integral part of my plan. I called teachers at home where they could relax. But, before I phoned anyone, I thought a lot about what I would want if roles were reversed. I asked teacher friends for their opinions. Then I thought some more. A picture began taking shape. To simply observe and then help seemed stagnant and a waste of precious time: I would probably appear less of a colleague and more of an evaluator. This was not the idea. There was much to share - conferences, workshops, videos, books and, most importantly, what I had learned from teacher links and from trying things out in my own classroom. Since I had made meaning, of whole language pedagogy, how could I best help other teachers to make sense of whole language for themselves? I wanted the project to be valid. I wanted to tap the uniqueness of each teacher and each class. Therefore, I would need to be more involved. I would have to *experience* each group of students. I would have to have a sense of each new classroom I entered, before the teachers and I began to learn together. How could I encourage teachers to give whole language a *genuine* try?

"...the lines hummed with questions"

Simple, really. They had questions. My involvement with teachers would consist in answering their questions by actually showing them what I would do. I would be thinking out loud. I would perform my own meanings. I would be demonstrating how I talked myself into sense. This would not be a transmission of knowledge from one person to another in the traditional "If-I-know-something-and-I-tell-you, then-you-will-know-it-too" form. No. Instead, my preoccupation would be to help teachers make their *own* meanings. I would simply act out as many answers as possible to as many of their questions as possible. *It would be a live, human, one-to-one response.*

I went to the phone and the lines hummed with questions:

- "How do I start?"
- "What about spelling?"
- "How do I motivate my students to write?"
- "How much time should I expect my grade level to write?"
- "How do you share?"
- "How do you brainstorm?"
- "What is home reading? How can I start it?"
- "What about publishing?"

- "Can you help me (this was a 3-4 level teacher) with peer editing? I'm lost."
- "Would you organize a lesson making a Big Book?"
- "How should I respond to their writing?"
- "Can you show me a sample of a child's development in writing over a year?"
- "Can I integrate other subject areas into my writing time?"
- "Can you show me how to make a book for publishing?"
- "Is it all just journal writing? Are there other choices for writing?"

I could see I was going to be friend, colleague, craftswoman, musician, negotiator, teacher, diplomat and salesperson. I had to know my subject and I had to be able to adapt quickly to the individuality of each teacher and of his or her students. Now *that* was a challenge, but I loved it.

I packed my bags, together with a case of slides which illustrated both the writing development of one of my students over the year, and examples of my style of classroom management.

I also bought a large portfolio which would hold the many poems I had written for the various themes and

subject areas in my curriculum. Last was a huge suitcase in which I placed actual samples of materials from my own classroom.

During the initial phone calls, teachers had been asked to prepare books for the children with blank paper inside: I felt strongly about brightly coloured writing books with large blank pages for beginning writers. I also shared with the teachers the fact that I usually started each child's book off with a note from me. This was my way of confirming to children that I *would* be there for them even on the written page, I explained. If publishing was on the menu, teachers were asked to have the required materials ready. In fact, anything that would save time so we could *"get on with it"* was done in advance of my arrival. Finally, I requested that as much of the day as possible be set aside for my visits. Then into the classrooms I went.

As I said a few pages back, I explained much of whole language pedagogy to the teachers through their students. I felt *both* parties needed to understand the reasons for daily home-reading, writing and sharing, for listening and speaking, for publishing, and for approximated spelling. I always started with home-reading and showed how I (with help from my own teacher links) had set it up. Everyone saw the large detergent boxes which had been wallpapered and then filled with books. We explored the stencils that

accompanied each box. On each were a list of story titles and then spaces for the date and an adult's signature. With the students, we role-played different ways of reading books with someone at home, e.g., each reads a page, or a paragraph, or a sentence. Then in one school, teachers and I wrote these methods of sharing into letters for parents of children in the first cycle. The letters, we hoped, would aid them in taking a responsible role in their child's reading development. In fact, this is exactly what happened. Parents were grateful for the guidance the letters gave.

All home-reading components were placed into a large Ziplock Freezer bag which ensured both a means of organization, as well as protection, of the books. The total package smacked of *Obligation*. It also allowed parents to see just where their child was in reading development, which was excellent for communication with parents at parent-teacher interviews. Some teachers already had home-reading programs of their own in operation. Wonderful! I took their suggestions, combined them with the suggestions of other teachers, and they all became part of the sharing from school to school. Even with all this support, there were still sceptics. I remember one teacher's doubts. The majority of her students were French-speaking. Would there be a *listener* at home, to help? In my heart, I wondered too. My solution: I bought

freezer bags at lunch, ran off the accompanying stencils, and we sent books home that very same afternoon.

The next morning, without exception, all the students except one came back with papers signed. "Let's verify this," I thought. We paired up students and they read their books to each other. We moved around to listen. They had done their homework. Out of curiosity we asked *who* had shared with them. It wasn't always the parent. Many *listeners* were older brothers and sisters. In one case a neighbour had been brought in, because, as the child said, "She knows more English than my mom." We helped the child who had not completed the assignment in this way: an older student was called in to listen to him read. It took five to ten minutes each day (this *listener* can also be a competent reader from within the class). They shared and then signed the appropriate form. The format for home-reading, therefore, is simply transferred to the school environment. It was, and still is, a reality that no matter how *formal* one makes the obligation, some parents cannot or will not comply. I breathed a quiet sigh of relief, since the overall enthusiastic response obviously had impressed the teacher. We had adapted and worked together, and that was the bottom line in this project. I alone certainly did neither have, nor wanted to be relied upon, to have *all solutions*. What I did possess, though, was a truly *stubborn determination* that ways could be found to overcome would-be problems.

After home-reading, the classroom became an arena for *warm-up*. Students at all levels must be motivated to write. *Warm-up* is simply a never-ending list of oral and written activities which includes:

- Poetry
- Songs
- Round Robin stories
- Storytelling
- Written messages by teachers and students on the blackboard

I tried to experiment with as many warm-up activities as possible in the three days I visited a school. This warm-up involved sharing and risk-taking for all. Although I acted out many of the above many times, I would turn to a teacher or student and say: "You're on ...

"Practice makes perfect," I would declare with a grin.

When we wrote on the board, we wrote anything and everything - short poems, riddles, personal news, news of the hour, or stories. At all levels, I sometimes chose to write in approximated spelling, or with pictures. Students and teachers alike had to become convinced that there were different ways to communicate along the road of writing development and that each way was valuable and

valid. We read songs written on bristol board, we chanted poems. We went from the whole poem or song to examining the parts more closely. Like a zoom lens, we zeroed in on beginning and final consonant sounds, vowel sounds, rhyming words, compound words, "doing" words, "descriptive" words, and persons, places and things. The questions we asked depended on *the level of the child*. We changed words and phrases in the poems. We often modelled a whole new poem from the one in front of us. The children's *new creation* was then printed onto lined bristol board by the teacher or by the student and then illustrated by the student. All the poems I travelled with were printed, illustrated and then laminated. The poetry was generally of the "seasonal" type.

The teacher-as-guide simply surrounds his or her students with material covering subjects of interest to them. The books students read or listen to, and the poems or songs they learn can relate to any area of the curriculum. In one Catholic school, religion was integrated into *warm-up*, and became a Big Book. In another school, a Big Book on penguins emerged. Let me explain: there never was a "science" lesson, per se. We simply introduced the study of penguins into warm-up, writing, sharing, and publishing time.

Books were read and poems/songs on penguins were introduced. Art was incorporated. Facts on penguins or short stories about them were written on the blackboard by the teachers at the beginning of the school day. Penguin words were brainstormed and written into a Big Book called the ABC's of Penguins: "*R is for the rookery that penguins build with stones.*" These same words were also placed into a child's personal dictionary. Finally, in a collaborative learning situation, another Big Book called "Our Friends in Tuxedos" was produced. And throughout all of this, the students still had their own free writing time in which many individuals published their own stories on penguins (though they didn't have to). Did everyone have ownership of penguins in the end? *Absolutely*!!

Teachers motivate students through warm-up. Students respond by writing. Teachers motivate again by introducing ownership through publishing and sharing. Students react by wanting to write more. Teachers need a framework, yes, and then it's a simple matter of gathering suggestions and creating new ideas to fill this framework. *Framework, suggestions and new ideas are best realized when teachers link up with fellow teachers who want to discover their pedagogy together.* Many teachers and I took a half or full day to make materials. I brought wallpaper books with me. In many areas, budgets were so low that we ripped up old readers to make individual stories (I had verified the legality of this). We covered the stories with

wallpaper - so durable - and they became the first set of home-reading books. We chose the stories carefully, according to interest and level of reading development. We then took books teachers had in their class library and placed many of them into sets, according to the amount of reading involved, not the vocabulary. These, too, were placed in boxes to be read at home.

Then we asked principals if they would match those books we had made with new reading material. Those we asked, agreed. We went on to make three or four copies of the same story, and these were taped for listening stations. We taped Big Books and realized that buying one Big Book was cheaper than buying four small individual copies. In one school we taped the Big Books published by the class. If my priority was getting teachers to try, then, as I've stated before, being realistic about money and materials was very important. Time given for *preparation* was extremely well received. There is nothing quite so pleasurable to teachers as this... except, perhaps, receiving free samples!! As one colleague declared; "You see. You're a teacher. You know we need this time and you've given it."

Unfortunately I didn't implement this idea until later in the project, therefore many teachers didn't benefit. Apologies from an old brain that didn't refine quickly

enough. It certainly would be part of any future teacher link time.

Now let us pause and look at the writing process. Many of my colleagues had never heard the words whole language and others were unsure as to how to implement. At the Grade 1 level, I handled it this way. As I stated previously, I have a firm belief that large blank pages are a necessity at the beginning stages of writing development. The child must be able to explore without the rigidity of lines. Yes, they might go from right to left, or from bottom to top, but eventually, after pictures, labelling, copying (only if they can read it), and much experimentation, they *will* arrive at *consistent* left to right movement. "*Then*, if you must use lines," I said to teachers, "feel free." Motivation is still a key word to be remembered by the teachers as they guide their students. The books in which the students write have to be *owned* by each child. We brainstormed ways to add to this motivation and sense of personal ownership. Ideas were as follows:

1. On their book covers, students could draw or cut and paste:
   - Seasonal pictures
   - Any picture
   - A design
   - Pictures from magazines

2. Teachers could:
   - Use colourful wallpaper
   - Change the books monthly
   - Laminate covers

(I must state here, in a rather wry manner, that construction paper in certain colours is so thin now that it rips too easily. My advice then would be to laminate or use plain wallpaper. But then, perhaps the construction paper in your area will be sturdy enough! For teachers of Grade 2 and up, file folders make excellent *portfolios*. They are available as regular supplies and can be ordered in plain or in various bright colours. To make them into books, simply fold from the bottom up, two or three inches, and staple at both ends. Designs, etc., can still be placed on the covers).

First Cycle and Second Cycle

In grade one classrooms, before the actual writing started, I responded to these questions and comments from teachers:

– "My children are afraid. They feel they can't spell."

– "Some *want* correct spelling. How do I deal with this?"

I answered by saying that for a child, learning to write *is* frightening at the start. Making writing a *consistent activity* automatically goes a long way towards alleviating this fear. My second answer came by my sitting down yet again with the source of my own learning, students. We talked, the teachers listened:

> "Do you think," I asked the students, "that you should be expected to know how to spell all the words you want to say?" Heads shook solemnly. We chatted about scientists, and how they experiment again and again before they get exactly what works, but how nothing scientists do along the way is wrong or a waste of time.

> "Would you like to write?" I queried. Heads nodded vigorously.
>
> "Alright," I responded, "let's start experimenting... with these." And I brought out small blackboards, chalk, and kleenex to erase with (old socks also make excellent erasers).

Ten minutes were given to *exploring ANY word*. The students erased, wrote, copied, and I kept reminding them that any approximation was *"awesome."* And if their friend had more letters written down, that was just fine. "We didn't all learn to walk or talk at the same time," I would say, "BUT we *ALL* did both eventually!" A strip of brightly coloured book binding tape (3 to 4 cm wide) was placed on each child's desk, and all lowercase letters of the alphabet were printed there in black. The words chosen for *experimentation* came from something done during our warm-up. If we had read about an elephant, we tried elephant. If we were reading a Christmas story then we tried Christmas words. The longer the word, the better, and each child carved out the sounds she or he heard and felt. If a child had no sounds to share, then she or he copied from a friend, no problem. If the whole class spoke English as a second language, then blackboards weren't even brought into the picture. In this case, we learned about writing with lots of *Warm-ups*, then picture drawing, and finally, sharing during writing time.

You can well imagine that I heard the word "but" consistently during my travels, especially in reference to spelling. To every but, I gave an honest answer. Blackboards are a terrific tool to motivate and encourage students at the beginning stages of writing development. They can also be used for learning the shape of letters in printing and for writing that very important "News Bulletin" first thing in the morning: the child walks in, writes it down and places it on the blackboard ledge to be seen, read, and talked about.

After the children and I had been *"scientists"* with *"Grade 6 words,"* I sat down with them again. I made a solemn promise that in time, they would see more and more letters appearing in their words. I then showed them samples of my students' progress from September to June. The samples of other students' writing development had impact! *"But,"* I said, "*You* have to promise to practise every day." Small heads nodded readily. Smiles of confidence appeared as they realized I was allowing them to be their own special person and to take responsibility for their learning. The teachers also felt a sense of being *allowed*, because someone was carefully explaining that yes, although one must always start with the whole, one could indeed go down and examine the parts. The fact was we just weren't working it in reverse any more. Neither were we spending half our day dealing with those parts. To be noted here is that teachers loved the blackboards.

In my role as a teacher link, I painted over 500 of these blackboards in the confines of my apartment. The teachers' sincere appreciation made it my pleasure!

Of course the ultimate experimentation came with students filling up their pages with their thoughts. We brainstormed the kinds of things we could write about. Writing was to be drawn from their own lives and from their own communication. *"Anything goes,"* I said, and that's what we wrote on the covers of their books. During the writing process, all teachers present moved among the students, encouraging and helping them to extend their thoughts. We offered suggestions, made comments, and asked questions.

The teacher *MUST* be there, gently soothing and protective, but ever so softly pushing each child up his or her ladder of development. It is tricky, at first, to co-ordinate and to try to see, and to extend each child's abilities in a too short period of time. And some of the first grade teachers would look at the writing and say glumly, "But it looks so primitive. It seems impossible that they'll *EVER get there*." I always laughed at that because, of course, I had felt the same way. But then I'd speak with the strong conviction born of six years of watching this development happen with every kind of child. *I trust the pedagogy implicitly.*

Besides, I always added, since it is pedagogy that has become part of our curriculum, we have to at least give it a fair go before saying "No." Risk taking and experimentation were again key words. And I reminded teachers over and over again "Don't hesitate to call me when when you need me."

During writing time, no student was to say "I'm finished" after only 5 minutes. I expected all students to fill up a page, for a minimum of 15 minutes, for the first while. That time gradually increased to 30 minutes. Children must, of course, be given ground rules. I always showed them the time on the clock and said I didn't even want to hear the word "finished" until then. They do get used to it, and gradually one hears only groans of dismay when writing time is up.

The students and I also took a look at what kinds of things could be discussed with friends during this period. Talking about what they would be doing at recess was definitely *not* on the agenda. They could however certainly help a friend by spelling a word, brainstorming a topic, or by sharing what they had written thus far. Many teachers were worried about loss of control during writing. I reminded them that as guides, we could keep the framework as structured as we wished at the start. Although *my* class was divided into groups, I did not expect

all teachers around the province to follow suit. I learned to be flexible and deal with the personality of each teacher.

I *wanted* each teacher to feel comfortable. I *wanted* the students to write, and if that meant desks remaining in rows, so be it! Many teachers did decide to group their students, some already had, and others went as far as I do after the first month, i.e., allowing students who "get busy quickly" to choose their place for writing in the classroom on that day. When writing time was over, there were inevitably those few still deeply engrossed in their story or news. They were always allowed five minutes more while the rest of us gathered at the front of the room to share. Those that took the extra five minutes had to be especially quiet so as not to disturb us. The teachers and I collected all the students' writing books. One by one, a few children were asked to share orally what they had written. This activity is so important to each child's growth. Students must learn to speak and read clearly, to listen, to make comments and suggestions, and to ask questions.

I helped the students to understand what comments, suggestions and questions were, by having an *imaginary, very intelligent* six-year-old named Kelly hop out of me and explain with examples. Then she would hop right back inside and wait to hear if they had learned from her. This was always comical, as, no matter where I was, there was

always one tiny tot who would turn to a friend and whisper "Where did she go?" Many of them mimicked Kelly exactly and she gave others the confidence to come up with their own questions. It helped start the process of sharing our writing with a difference! Both the teachers and I were satisfied.

In schools I visited three separate times throughout the year, we went one step further with sharing. We divided the class into groups of four, with a group leader. I recall one school with special delight. The students were largely French-speaking. The teacher had really been dedicated to "trying" this "new theory of learning." I went back for my second visit two months after the first. Imagine my smile, when after writing, the children divided into groups, group leaders read, and then asked the following questions as though they had been doing it all of their lives:

- "What did I write about?"
- "Which part did you like and why?"
- "Do you have any comments, questions or suggestions?"

Then next day, she had her students simply "pair and share." It was fast, efficient and different. *Wonderful!*

If a student was ready to publish, then we all shared our responses to his or her writing, in order to establish if the story made sense and if there were perhaps words or phrases that could be added or subtracted from the plot. I know it sounds sophisticated for a six-year-old, but believe me, they tackle it. One excellent aspect of sharing is that *students learn to become good and fair critics.* It is so important to establish these habits as soon as possible for future years, as students must learn to develop the ability to revise and edit their writing. Children must be encouraged from the beginning to communicate with each other clearly, honestly, and with a certain compassion. It isn't an impossible task, provided there is a consistency in the way that the writing process is approached throughout the grades. This year, I am enjoying Grade 2 with students most of whom I taught last year. What satisfaction it has been to see the reading, writing, listening and speaking development continue! Many are able to follow a process of revising and editing that rivals the abilities of students at the Grade 5 level. Along with all this oral sharing comes an obligation for a written response from the teacher. "Fine," I said to my colleagues, "We are asking our students to dare to fill up a page. What kind of response, then, should we be prepared to offer them?"

The general answer was, *"It must be valid, honest and not just lip service."* But many teachers remarked that responding requires a lot of extra time, especially in

second cycle. I knew that to be true. But I replied, "If we start by writing to every student for a time, we can change, if necessary, to answering half the class one day and half the next." (In reality, once students are publishing or working on other "choices" in writing, a teacher is never being asked to respond to all students at once.)

Certainly, in Grade 1 or with any class not used to daily writing, total response is mandatory at the start: this one-to-one written communication is a tremendous factor in motivating writers to "keep on keeping on." It is so difficult to meet the emotional needs of our students throughout the year. This written dialogue creates an extremely personal touch. Students often begin to discuss personal problems or feelings. This can help give us an added insight into their personalities, relationships, and home life. Students *are given an outlet to speak, which is of prime importance today.* The wonderful part about writing and responding is that no matter where a child is on that "ladder of development," she or he can fill up a page - whether with a picture or with print. I remember a special education teacher remarking on this when she spent time in my classroom. "You know," she said, "whole language really allows each child to feel a sense of accomplishment." Let us remember that children with special needs are simply at an earlier stage of reading, writing, listening and speaking development, but that *shouldn't mean they cannot be involved with the writing*

process in a whole language classroom. One such child who has spent two years with me is only now writing in complete sentences. Yes, she took longer, but it is now happening, and we *knew* she would need more time. Children who are learning a second language require more time as well. This makes sense as these children are acquiring oral language at the same time. It was important that I had many samples of various kinds of students' work to share with other teachers. "The proof is in the pudding" as they say. I know it is difficult to *trust* that there will be progress when one sees some of the first primitive marks made.

At an earlier point, I said that daily writing does not have to *remain* locked into one writing book. Certainly in kindergarten and first grade, one book for writing may suffice. The most important aspect for young writers is being able to carve out some sort of communication. Many beginning writers do not distinguish between different kinds of writing although there are always exceptions. When they begin to write, it's all one **BIG STORY**!! As students progress in reading and writing, and as they mature in the realization that there is a difference between news and story, fiction and non-fiction, fable and mystery, and between biography and autobiography, then they can be given different portfolios to go along with these various types of writing. This all has its place as the child grows in language awareness.

The teachers and I experimented with as many different kinds of writing activities as we could. Those we couldn't get to were written down for future reference. We made Big Books at the Grade 5 level in one school. The "fact" or "fiction" written into these books was created in small groups, in pairs, or individually. In first cycle classrooms, we talked of writing letters to dads and moms, or favourite relatives, either at work or at home. One teacher suggested that there be a class address book so that one friend could discreetly write to another in class, and then mail it home as a surprise. Another teacher suggested that we have a box full of assorted bristol board, markers, stickers and coloured paper for students to make cards for special occasions, with poems or messages inside. Stamps would be bought and school envelopes could be used. Then teachers would mail their students' letters or cards. Another excellent contribution was the idea that shoe bags be hung up in the classroom. Two or three children's names would be put onto each pocket (unless you're lucky enough to have two bags). Then, in class, messages could be sent back and forth to friends. (If shoe bags aren't available, teachers may use empty kleenex boxes, decorate them, and then turn the boxes into "personal mail boxes" to be placed on each child's desk).

At a Grade 3 level, we thought of something else to encourage writing among students. We would take a long stencil and, using a black marker, draw a series of boxes of different sizes. One or more students could make up a comic strip and publish it. Finally, I showed teachers a box filled with little books of different shapes. There was also loose material in the box for children who wished to make their own books. These books, I suggested, could be written in during writing time or taken home to "fill up." My own students have always loved their "Tiny Books."

In the second cycle, teachers, students and I brainstormed ideas about writing. We talked of changing the journal into a "log" or a "Private Property" kind of book. *It seemed older students were feeling "journalled to death." All levels of writing workshop should have changes in their rhythm and flow, so that students don't begin to lose interest in writing.* During my visits with grade six students, I continued to talk about writing by saying: "Here is a possible scenario for future writing workshops. We decided to start off with two choices *only*, either story or poetry writing or personal communication. These two choices would remain in effect until everyone became comfortable with the process *and* with the reality that this kind of writing wouldn't be going away!" In both classes I then asked students how they felt about writing and although there was *some* positive feedback, generally I heard muttered comments such as:

"I don't like writing."

"I'm not good at it."

"I can never think of what to write."

I nodded and replied gently: "You're right! Writing can be intimidating and *I* certainly don't always find it easy." With that, I stepped up to the blackboard, picked up the chalk and proceeded to try two short stories, one fiction and one not. They were by no means masterpieces and I asked for help as I worked through them. But my risk-taking paid off. I could feel cautious approval from the students. "You know, being *Super Writer* isn't the point," I said quietly. "Learning to feel comfortable with written communication is." I carried on by talking of other choices for writing that could be added to the two pieces that I had chosen to work on. The students contributed their own ideas, disqualified some of mine, and refined some choices to suit their own tastes. Inside, I just smiled.

They liked the idea of writing a comic book, although they took it one step further. The students decided that *they* would publish their final copy onto specially lined white bristol board. Thus would emerge a giant comic book! I then asked whether they read magazine or newspaper articles. One student suggested making an

area where people could go, read an article and then write about it. "Great," I said, "and if the article is a long one, you could write a precis of it. Your teacher would give you tips about a precis first, of course. You'll see that it's easy to condense a large amount of information. Then you would be responsible for writing a certain number per month. In fact," I suggested, "you might want to do the same kind of thing with book reports."

From there we moved to the subject of cards and letters. I wasn't surprised to find that this kind of written communication was rare. I wrote the words "Relatives, Caring, Giving and Receiving" on the board. Then we talked. The students took time to reminisce about special events, visits, dinners and gifts. Now I asked: "What about giving ... sending some sort of written communication to people you care about? "One student suggested thank-you cards. Another talked of writing letters which would share part of her life. "How do you think your grandparents, aunts and uncles would respond to this?" I asked: "Would they smile?" ("Of course," they had to admit. "Well yes, they sure would.") and "Cards and Letters" were voted in as another choice. Students decided that their written communication had to be "substantial" and that they would be responsible for two letters a month, with special cards being written when the occasion arose.

"You see," I said to teachers and students alike, "one doesn't have to be bored during writing workshop. On one day, for example, you might add a few paragraphs to the latest mystery you are composing and then work with a friend on a comic book. Or, you might have a full-class lesson on revising and editing for 20 minutes. You could then peruse a sports article and comment on it, or write a special letter of thanks to an aunt. You could publish part of a story, or involve yourself in making the book your story will be published in. You could work on your own, with a friend, or in a small group. Perhaps, as a class, the time is being spent writing a Halloween Big Book to share with first cycle, or an Adventure Big Book that will stay in the school library for years to come. Or maybe you are interviewing one of your friends, or the principal, or another teacher in order to write a biography. You may be involved in creating a play that will soon be produced for others to see. Perhaps you'll write a song or create a poem to be published on bristol board and also placed in stencil form in the Class ALBUM for the year. Then again you might be busy with a friend who is helping you revise and edit your latest story." The activities, experiences and learning that happens when students write in all these different situations can be endless.

Both classes were sincerely interested in what we had envisioned, and why not? *Choices do give that rhythm, movement and sense of freedom within a secure framework.*

Besides, there simply isn't enough time within our current curriculum to cover each area discretely. When a writing workshop is adapted, as I have described it here, we can incorporate many areas of the curriculum in a less redundant and more interesting way.

"The teacher link... hears about our classes, feels our different characters and personalities"

Unfortunately, my time with second cycle teachers and students was limited. How I would have relished the opportunity to team up and experiment further! My advance statement would have been, "*YES*, spelling *can* be well addressed and *YES* I've *found* ways to help students become efficient revisors and editors." But my time was over: the project for 1989-1990 had come to an end. Evaluations poured in. They warmed my heart, for it *had* been a very *full* life for two years. Teachers communicated as I hadn't heard in a long time.

The evaluation form teachers were asked to complete included these two questions:

- Do you think this type of in-class support by the ministère de l'Éducation is valuable and should be continued?

- Do you have any reservations about the project for now or looking ahead to the future?

Administrators and teachers responded in some of the following ways:

"I would vote for this to continue."

"It is an excellent project and should be expanded into other areas of the curriculum."

"The project is working too well. Knowing the government, odds are it'll be cut. This was great. Teachers working for teachers, not a consultant or a company talking about an ideal situation."

"Why didn't we have this kind of project when whole language was imposed seven years ago? We saw company representatives, not teachers, who know the problems of working in a regular class."

"Absolutely no reservations!"

"It is a very practical support by the MEQ and it should be continued. All grades should be included. All schools should be included."

"Excellent. Must be continued."

"All in all it was the best type of project I've ever been asked to take part in. Please continue it."

"I strongly recommend that projects of this kind should continue. Many of our teachers have been accustomed to teaching the English language arts program in the traditional manner. Any assistance in the implementation of the new English language

arts program which can be given would be greatly appreciated."

"Definitely it should. How else are we to know how to implement new programs or projects? In-service sessions are worth twice the weight in gold compared to workshops."

"Yes. I feel this is a valuable project. It helps to remove any reservations one might have about whole language."

"Absolutely! In my estimation this far surpasses the workshops I have attended. Seeing theories put into action is definitely the best method for me."

"Definitely! Send her to all the teachers you can. She is an example of the workability of the program."

"Projects of this type are excellent for the exchange of ideas they generate and this is particularly helpful to the small rural schools where the teachers have few contacts with other teachers."

"I hope we can continue. I have requests for this service at other grade levels."

Is this desire still alive in 1992? I believe it is. This year the Ministry sent four of us to share with teachers in various outlying areas of Québec, and the response was exactly the same. As one colleague so aptly put it:

"The teacher link hears what we have access to, hears about our classes, feels our different characters and personalities and then addresses the theory and subsequent implementation according to this information. Now in my mind, THAT'S dealing with the issue."

Hopefully this kind of reality will grow and become a firm priority in education. In closing I do wish to thank all those I encountered as I moved around the province. You gave me the courage to board tiny planes and drive through unknown territory. Your desire to have me in your schools and classrooms, your welcome, and your openness will never be forgotten. My last words, though, are just for my colleagues.

Thank you indeed for confirming what I said at the start:

I believe in teachers.

COM' ON IN THE WATER'S FINE!

by Janet Fraser

From their perch on the shelf, THOSE BOOKS looked at me.
"Whole Language is it!" they shouted with glee.
"Whole Language... what is that...
A new way to speak?" I asked in a tone unusually meek.

There were books there from Newman and Graves and others,
All jammed together like long lost brothers.
"Hey... dont't look at me," I said aloud,
I can't... no I don't want a change right now.
As a teacher I've shown that I'm really involved.
I've read and I've risked, I've given it my all!"

"Yes you have," said THOSE BOOKS, "we know you have grown.
You've been open to learning, that you have shown."
I read two of their pages... my stomach felt queasy.
"Listen," I said, "This doesn't sound easy".
"How," I queried, "how will I do it?" THOSE BOOKS answered calmly,
"We'll help you get through it,"
"Oh really," I said in an arrogant way,
"Maybe with BASALS I'd rather stay.
Have you any idea of what I'll go through?
This is no tiny change... whole language is new.
We do charts, we have themes, we write in a journal
And I am the CHIEF, I am the COLONEL!
I know the curriculum - know it by heart.
I know in my mind right from the start.
What teachers of next year expect my dears,
Is that kids read at level, that much is clear.

I work from the parts right up to the whole,
It makes sense to me, so that is my goal,
My lessons are structured, there's phonics at ten,
We learn words at ten thirty, do spelling and then...
We apply the sounds to the words in the reader.
They read pre-primers - hey I am their leader.
Guided reading at eleven and at the half hour...

With written questions they are showered!
Do I have time to read 5 books a day?
You're joking... from the curriculum I cannot stray!

I feel as a teacher I have the right
To question whole language with all of my might.
Basals and stencils I've come to trust!
Is this theory to read...
Is this theory a must?
New theories... now listen,
We've had them before.
They're around for a while,
Then they're tossed out the door.

It is I who am in there doing the teaching
I have to believe in what I am preaching.
I have to trust the product I sell... to my students,
And yes, to their parents as well.
Those parents will come, my knowledge to test,
So whole language you'd better be sure you're the best!"

"No problem," THOSE BOOKS said full of pride,
"Just read us, you'll see, we have nothing to hide.
But read us you must, you cannot shirk,
Get busy my friend it's time to work, we've listened with patience.
It's been a good chat, but read us you must,
And THAT is THAT.
It's the person who risks, it's the person who tries,
It's the person who's open, who'll always get by,
You can't condemn, something you know nothing about,
Knowledge is the tool that'll give you the CLOUT...
To agree or not, that's allowed in the end,
But you have to have knowledge to do that my friend."

So I went to the Ocean, THOSE BOOKS came with me,
And after a while some sense I could see.
I read every morning, my interest was heightened.
I found as I read that I wasn't as frightened
Where did I start?... Why with the children...
And how they learn language by the million.
In learning to speak, they listen a lot
To the WHOLE of the language no... they're not taught.
They hear language's rhythm, and sound and meaning,
And like a lotion, silently streaming,

It begins to soak through, it's internalized well,
For each child as they're ready it's like a huge swell,
They speak, they practise, they risk each day...
And nothing, but nothing, stands in their way.
And that swell keeps moving in all directions,
And the child begins to make connections.
The amazing thing is that they do it,
Without any lessons on how to prove it.

I took what I'd learned, and thought it through.
I could see that I had, some adapting to do.
But the comfort I felt, from reading THOSE BOOKS,
Made me say hey, I'll do it, by hook or by crook!

With a look in my eye, and a lift to my chin,
I walked into school, with a determined grin.
I looked at the desks, each one in a row
That just wouldn't do for a whole language show.
The rows became groups, well that was a start,
In my room the students would not be apart.
They'd need each other to talk about writing,
Oh brother, I thought, they'll probably start fighting!
They didn't at all, instead they just cared
To exchange ideas , by golly, they shared!
I made books to write in, they'd last through September,
I wrote a brief note each child would remember.
The note said, "Hi, here's a book for you.
You can write what you want, that means pictures too!"

A child cried out "But I'm not a speller,"
I gave her a hug and proceeded to tell her.
"Listen, come close and don't feel blue,
It's easy, no problem, here's all you do...
Say a word to yourself, write down what you hear,
Don't ever think can't or never, my dear,
Your an inventive Speller, take on the risk,
No parent I know was writing at six!"

Slowly with confidence built up each day,
My kids were relaxed and went their own way.
With friends, by themselves, all over the room,
They wanted to write, I was over the moon!
I made sure that their poems and stories galore,
Filled up the place from ceiling to floor.

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Did it take work? Oh yes, even at night,
But the progress I saw was such pure delight.
I didn't do everything, being not a fool,
I recruited some parents and students at school.
You have to go slowly, one step at a time,
Try doing too much, you'll go out of your mind.

In my room we're authors, we do follow through,
The creation, the editing, and publishing too!
We brainstorm, we themestorm, we listen, we read.
In a primary grade one, what more do we need?
We read whole, we write whole, we taste it so well,
and over the years, I really can tell.
The difference is these kids are hungry for reading.
But not just one basal, that's not what they're needing.
With the WHOLE, they're not scared to read anything new.
They gobble it up in one giant chew! And as for the writing,
One kid said at lunch,
"Can I send my story to author Bob Munsch?"

Is there structure you ask in the way I teach now?
Are the kids really learning? Oh yes... and how!
With reading the students - some five books a day,
With writing and sharing and publishing I'd say.
There is no problem, there need be no fear.
From the whole to its parts,
Kids learn more and that's clear!

And don't think for a moment, that they don't trace,
The grammer of English, it does have it's place.
Whole language
And this process won't stop when children are seven
Or in grade 6 or grade 11, it's a theory that touches
All subjects and ages, the facts can be seen
On their written pages.

It all comes down to this in the end.
That we as teachers must always bend...
To new ideas in education so kids get the best,
Throughout the nation. We ask them to risk.
Each day as we teach,
Then shouldn't we practise
Indeed what we preach?

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72-0053A